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SUBJECT: TURKISH PARLIAMENT HOLDS RAUCOUS DEBATE OVER CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT PROPOSAL

REF: ANKARA 1071 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (U) After contentious debate on May 7, parliament held the first round of voting on a controversial constitutional amendment package to move toward direct presidential elections, with 361 MPs voting in favor. A required second vote is scheduled for May 10. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) wants to send the package to President Sezer with at least 367 votes supporting. Sezer is expected either to withhold action until parliament recesses or veto the proposal. The parliamentary debate was particularly raucous, reflecting the current tense political atmosphere. Many deputies would prefer to leave changes of this magnitude to the next parliament. Turkey's influential business association, TUSIAD, recently issued a statement to the same effect.

¶2. (U) AKP has suspended a separate constitutional amendment package that would lower candidate's age from 30 to 25 and put independent candidates' names on the main ballot instead of separate slips. Parliament approved the proposal in the first round of voting on May 6 but has cancelled the required second round. Although AKP and opposition parties support the changes, the package was shelved for procedural reasons related to when candidates must declare.

¶3. (U) Still unresolved is whether parliament can continue to conduct business. Some argue that parliament can keep working so long as the presidential election process continues. Others maintain that parliament will recess closer to May 15, the constitutionally mandated end of the presidential election process. Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee Chair said, without hesitation, May 17. Other AKP MPs told us they plan to conduct business until June 4, when candidate lists will be finalized and candidates will hit the campaign trail full-time.

¶4. (U) With parliamentary elections set for July 22, the election calendar clock is ticking. Civil servants planning to run must resign by COB May 8. Potential candidates are busy lobbying party leaders, who must submit their candidate lists to the Supreme Election Board by June 8. AKP reportedly cautioned some senior officials and mayors, including PM Erdogan's Foreign Policy Advisor Ahmet Davutoglu, to consult with the party before resigning. As required by the constitution, the GOT replaced three key ministers with independent technocrats on May 8: Justice U/S Fahri Kasirga will serve as Justice Minister; Kayseri Governor Osman Gunes will serve as Interior Minister; and

Maritime Affairs U/S Amet Yilmaz will act as Transportation Minister.

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